Review Essay

Review and Analysis of Dolmage’s “Academic Ableism”


Ableism is an undeniable reality which exists in university spaces as a lens through which disabled students are perceived and judged. At the very outset, Dolmage (2017) orients the reader towards interaction with the ableism versus disablism discourse, defining the former as positive perceptions toward able-bodiedness and the latter as outright negative views toward the state of being disabled. The book begins with an introductory section that is fraught with examples of ableist mechanisms at play in the physical structures and the underlying psyche of students and faculty at large in the contemporary Western university system encompassing Canadian, American, and British higher education. Dolmage instantiates ableism through the metaphor of the “steep steps” by alluding to an illustration depicting an architectural structure comprised of towering pillars and narrow steps leading to a library in an educational institute.

Dolmage’s (2017) foregoing metaphor is one that is creative yet powerful in that it sets the tone and the overarching theme that characterize the chapters that follow, namely the ableist structuring of spaces and attitudes in higher education. In chapter 2, for example, the book shifts attention to the concept of disability accommodation and conceptualizes it essentially as a “retrofit.” This term is used to stress the notion that typical accommodations in higher education settings represent essentially an adjustment made retroactively to help the disabled student adapt to the ableist environment. Accommodations, in other words, are essentially a supplement or a band-aid rather than a long-term solution to the pressing issues surrounding ableist perceptions.
of disability in higher education. Dolmage further justifies the labelling of accommodations as retrofits on the basis that accommodations do not empower and include students but simply highlight, accentuate, and make their disability experience far more visible “by singling out the body that needs to ask for access” (Dolmage 2017: 79).

In one of the latter chapters, Dolmage (2017) critiques the contemporary notions of the concept of universal design (UD), arguing that it has been converted from an action-oriented process to simply a noun with no emphasis on the practices it should entail. Dolmage compares the intended outcomes of UD with those of accommodations typically extended to students in higher education. He recognizes commitment to UD implementation as a far more favourable option as it eliminates the need for accommodations in the first place by challenging educators and policy-makers to design environments with all students in mind.

The book concludes on an evocative note with a chapter centering on the misguided representations of disability as a segregation-deserving identity in Hollywood films. Dolmage (2017) analyzes the plots of films including Animal House (1978) and Accepted (2006) wherein the segregation and rejection of disabled protagonists is justified based on their possession of traits and characteristics perceived by the mainstream society as non-normative. Dolmage connects the culminating chapter to the “steep steps” metaphor from the book’s introductory sections. He does so by presenting the critique that films which depict the tribulations of disabled students rarely, if ever, advance the argument that the physical structures of university environments must be designed with all diverse students in mind.

From a critical analysis standpoint, there are at least two major respects in which the book evokes curiosity with respect to further areas and aspects that interested students and/or scholars might like to learn about in relation to student disability status in higher education. These are (a) intersectionality, and (b) educational leadership. Dolmage (2017) in the very first chapter articulates critical disability studies (CDS) as a key framework for shaping his argumentation throughout his analyses in the chapters to come. As he asserts therein, “[the] field of disability studies takes a critical approach to disability, grounded in disability rights and foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities” (Dolmage 2017: 5).

One highlight of the CDS perspective is its recognition of the complex intersections between various social identity markers (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) that characterize each disabled student’s individual experience in unique ways (Evans et al., 2017). Dolmage (2017), in chapter 1, highlights a key statistic concerning disabled international students, namely that the percentage of this specific population entering the British higher
education is increasing. However, what is amiss in this reference to disabled international students is an expanded discussion on ways in which the marginalized status of these students both as “disabled” and “international” interacts in complex ways to compound, for example, their transitional difficulties in the classroom and on campus at large. Crenshaw’s (1991) seminal work in the area of intersectionality issues for racially diverse women offers a highly pertinent line of research. Dolmage’s discussion would have been far more historically and empirically grounded with use of references and connections to such research to provide a meaningful background and framework to the reader.

A similar critique of Dolmage’s (2017) book may be made on the basis that it does not foreground the element of leadership – specifically, educational leadership – in terms of its pivotal role in addressing and combating ableism through targeted practices and strategies in higher education. Chapter 4, which centers on the implementation of UD principles, is a particularly relevant area for a nuanced discussion of the various models of educational leadership which advance UD-driven teaching and learning in educational environments. Transformative leadership, as a style and model advanced by the American scholar Carolyn Shields (e.g., Shields 2010), entails an overt focus on social justice goals and measurable change in negative attitudes toward marginalized students. Although Dolmage identifies the need for action and physical environment change that the concept of UD entails, his discussion in these aspects does not invoke educational leadership nor includes an in-depth presentation of the empirically supported leadership practices that the current status quo of student disability warrants in higher education.

In sum, Dolmage’s (2017) Academic Ableism is a thought-provoking text which offers complex analyses of multiple respects in which student disability across higher education spaces is reproduced through the presence of numerous environmental barriers symbolized, for example, by the “steep steps.” This book is commendable for its evocative discussions of pertinent areas which include UD strategies and the socially problematic representations of disability in the media such as film. Though the book glosses over considerations with respect to intersectionality issues and leadership action, these critiques must be situated against Dolmage’s own admission that “…this book has certainly failed to cover many important topics… but hopefully hasn’t failed to give you ways to change higher education” (Dolmage 2017: 191).

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